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FEB 25 1931

U. S. Department of A.

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In 3Hh
HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Tuesday, February 24, 1931.

(NOT FOR PUBLICATION)

Subject: "Fighting Moths in Furniture." Information from the Bureau of Entomology, U. S. D. A.

Bulletin available: "The Control of Moths in Upholstered Furniture."

Now and then a disaster occurs even in our peaceful, usually happy neighborhood. We are not bothered much with fires and earthquakes, but we do have occasional tragedies and many of them start from small beginnings. A very small insect was the cause of a real tragedy in the Taylors' home a few years ago. The insect was a clothes moth.

The Taylors had been saving up for years to buy an overstuffed davenport and chair for their living room. Alice Taylor had her heart set on that furniture even before she was married. She had planned exactly the kind she wanted to suit her living room -- soft green mohair with lovely large feather-stuffed cushions. Alice used to say that her idea of a comfortable home was a place where there were plenty of soft comfortable places to sit or lounge on. She and Jack couldn't afford such a handsome set of furniture when they first married, but they hoped to buy it in a year or two when Jack had had some raises in salary. In a year or two the babies began coming along and they used up all the extra pennies of every raise so the upholstered set had to be postponed. In the Taylors' living room the attractive green curtains that had been bought to go with the new furniture still hung at the windows waiting and the room still was furnished with the temporary couch and old chair that Alice had put in when she first started housekeeping. However, Alice had not changed her mind. She still longed for that furniture. In fact, she told us that she intended to have it when the babies were old enough not to ruin everything they touched with sticky hands, mud pies or their father's toothpaste. Sure enough. One Christmas Jack surprised her with the very davenport and chair she had been longing for all these years. You never saw anyone so pleased as Alice was with them. It made the whole neighborhood happy to see how she enjoyed her present. She said it would be her pride and joy for years to come. But she hadn't counted on the malicious little clothes moth that manages to live in almost every house, even in a home where there is a fine housekeeper like Alice.

One day Alice was brushing her furniture when she noticed that some bare spots were appearing on the cover of the chair along the front beneath the cushion and on the side near the bottom. In spite of repeated brushings the spot grew. Then presently other bare places appeared on the arm of the chair and on the back at the top. Moths were eating the woolen threads on the underside of the cloth. Not until the furniture was cleaned would anyone even suspect their presence.

When the fabric was brushed, the pile on the outside fell off because the woolen threads that held it had been eaten away by the small worms underneath. In spite of airing and sunning outdoors, moth balls and every other treatment the neighbors could suggest, the moths kept right on eating, winter and summer. They were under the woolen cover where it was pleasantly dark, warm and undisturbed, where there was plenty of hair filling or moss for their nests, a paradise for moths. In the open spaces in the sides, back and springs there was even room for the adult moths to fly about and mate and plenty of places for them to lay their eggs. Generation after generation could breed inside that furniture without being seen from the outside world and there was sufficient food in that chair cover to feed countless moths. Before long the population grew sufficiently bold and restless to crawl to the surface seeking new pastures. Alice's furniture was ruined.

There have been many disasters to upholstered furniture caused by moths, so many, in fact that furniture manufacturers and dealers and storage concerns have considered it a serious problem and have gone to much expense to fight and control moths. Recently the government's scientists in the Bureau of Entomology have been studying the problem in order to help the housewife. These scientists say that much of the trouble is caused by neglect or lack of information about the life history and habits of moths. Frequently these insects are discovered too late to prevent some defacement of the covers of furniture. And where a bare spot has been made, the appearance of the furniture has been spoiled.

Our friends, the entomologists, say that there are two kinds of moths that get into upholstered furniture -- the webbing clothes moth and the case-making clothes moth. One or the other or both are present in practically every household. Most housewives are already familiar with them as pests of clothing, rugs, piano felts and other woolen fabrics. The moths of both species are small, buff-colored millers with a wing spread of about one-half inch. They are seen flying about in darkened corners because they like the darkness. They have imperfectly developed mouth parts so they could not feed on fabrics if they wished. Their sole purpose in life is to lay the eggs that develop into the worms or larvae that cause the destruction. The larvae hatching from the eggs are, when fully grown, whitish and about half an inch long.

If I were planning a menu to please clothes moths I would include hair, fur, wool, feathers and all things made of these materials. Moth larvae only feed on materials of animal origin. Cotton, rayon goods, wrapping paper and vegetable fabrics are not eaten except in rare instances. Natural silk also, though not a vegetable product, is seldom eaten.

In upholstered furniture they feed on the woolen fibers in covers, the feathers in cushions and pads, and to a limited extent upon hair fillings. When the moth population grows very dense, the dead moths and larvae are also eaten. But people are wrong who think that the vegetable products used in upholstery are also eaten. Burlap, Spanish moss, flax straw or tow, palm fiber and sea moss are commonly used for padding the furniture and when any of these are next to the woolen cover, the larvae take advantage of their porous nature to secure a safe retreat where they can molt and rest when not feeding on the wool in the cover.

So much for moth habits. Now, how do they get into furniture? Upholstered furniture when built by reputable firms is free from moths. Great care is taken to use only insect-free materials. But since moths are universal pests, the furniture may soon become infested in any room where moths are present. The small female moth in flying about in search of a dark secluded place may crawl between the cushions and the back or sides of the chair or divan and there find a protected place to lay her eggs unseen and unmolested by brushes or vacuum cleaners. Or she may deposit her eggs here and there on the cover, placing them well down in the tufts of pile or in the seams or crevices formed by the edges of the pieces of the cover where they are tacked to the frame.

If the eggs hatch on the outside of the cover and the larvae feed on the surface they can be easily seen and reached. Surface feeding occurs chiefly on the portions of the cover turned against the wall; or behind pillows or in other shaded spots. It also occurs when the room is seldom used or is closed for the season. Frequent thorough brushing and airing will prevent damage done this way.

Feeding from below the cover is a more difficult matter to prevent or remedy. Fortunately, our friends, the scientists, have discovered a number of ways to fight moths successfully in furniture. There are several ways of preventing moths from starting their destruction. The problem could be eliminated at the beginning by the use of covers of leather, silk, cotton, linen or rayon which the moths will not eat. Many manufacturers of mohair fabrics are now treating their product with solutions that protect against moths. When buying new furniture with woolen covers, housekeepers may protect themselves by selecting only such pieces as have covers that have been treated at the factory. Where guarantees on such furniture are given, it is wise to take advantage of them.

Unbroken layers of cotton batting just under the cover, or cushions made simply of springs and cotton beneath the cover are constructions that prevent moths. Fumigation of the furniture before delivery will also help.

When the moths have already succeeded in getting in the furniture, fumigation is one of the best methods of getting rid of them. For home treatment by the housewife the use of paradichlorobenzene is recommended. All this brings me to what I really started to tell you in the first place. There is a new bulletin just out called "The Control of Moths in Upholstered Furniture." It tells all the whys and wherefores about this problem, and gives careful directions for caring for furniture, fumigating to remove moths and all the rest. This booklet will help you keep moths out of your upholstered furniture and prevent a household tragedy in your neighborhood.

Wednesday: "Obedience or Cooperation?" And a menu for the Noonday meal.

